

# MIGRANT INTEGRATION STRATEGY

CONSULTATION DAY  
DECEMBER 2023



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## Introduction:

With the aim of contributing to the public consultation on a strategy for migrant integration, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and the Refugee Advisory Board held a one-day consultation workshop in December 2023, bringing together individuals with a refugee/asylum seeker background to discuss, debate and document challenges, barriers, and potential solutions to migrant integration.

The topics for discussion and the questions posed were drawn from the online survey circulated by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, published in October 2023, as part of the public consultation to inform a national strategy for migrant integration.

This submission is the outcome of the consultation workshop and documents a condensed account of the responses to the topics and questions raised during the course of the workshop, as expressed by the 22 participants who attended the event.

For the purposes of the one-day consultation, the survey was broken down into three sections. The responses to each section were noted in detail and are outlined in this submission.

The consultation progressed as follows:

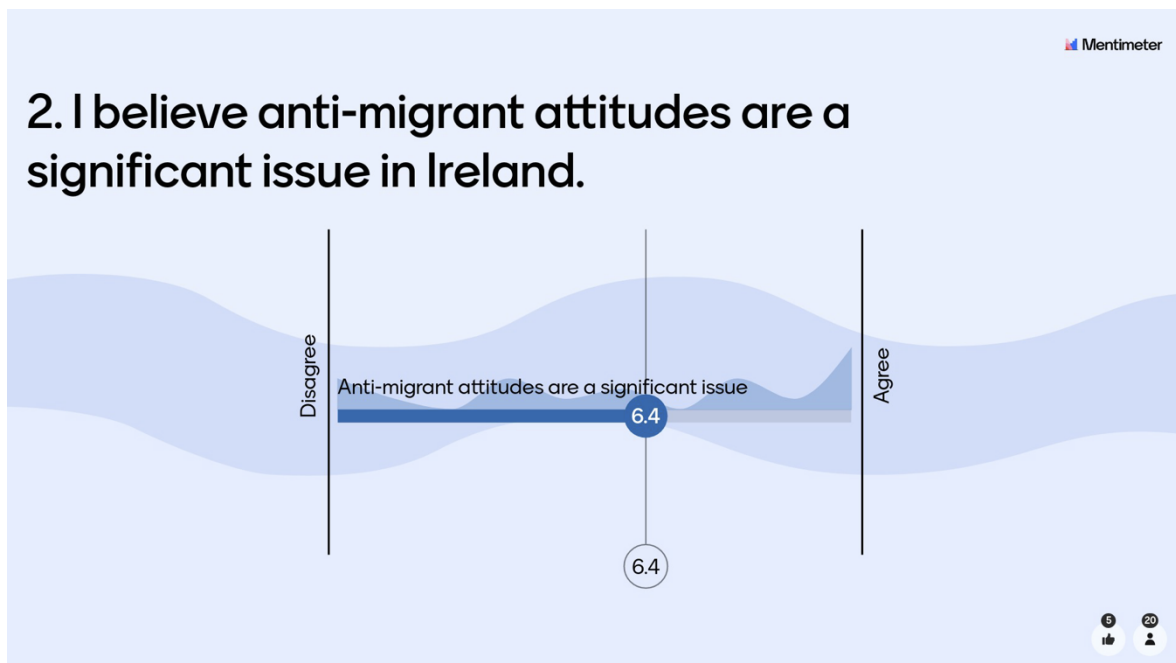
- Part One: Four single, separate questions posed, with participants' responses recorded.
- Part Two: Six topics addressed. Each topic began with a single question, with responses to this question recorded to determine which issue for any given topic was the most challenging. That issue was then discussed in detail by participants at each of the five tables and the key points from those discussions were noted.
- Part Three: The final hour of the consultation was taken up with discussion of three broad questions relating to migrant integration, again, mirroring the online survey. Participants considered each question for 20 minutes with note takers capturing the key points emerging from those discussions.

Responses to the single questions section (contained in Parts 1 & 2 below) were captured using the online interactive survey app 'Mentimeter'.

## Part 1 – Mentimeter Results:

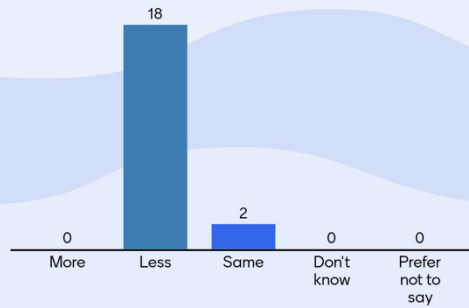


Result: 72% of those consulted agree that that Ireland is a welcoming place for migrants.



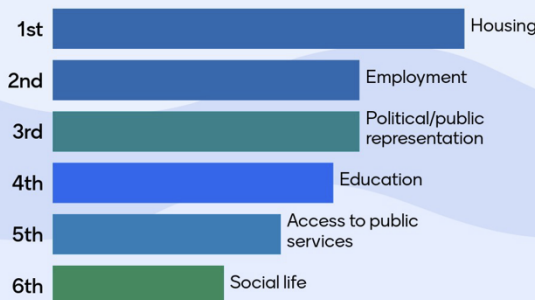
Result: 64% of participants believe that anti-migrant attitudes are a significant issue in Ireland.

3. Do you think migrants have more / less / the same opportunities as Irish citizens to engage in all areas of life in Ireland?



Result: 18/20 participants who voted believe migrants have less opportunities than Irish citizens to engage in all areas of life in Ireland.

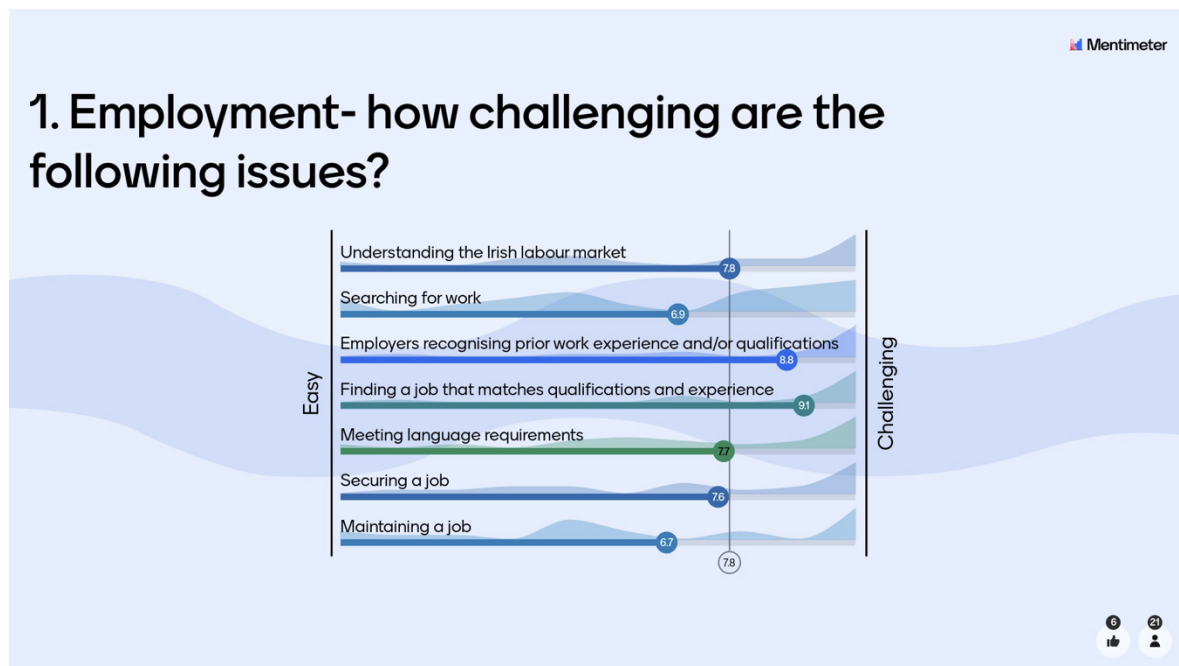
4. Which of the following areas are most challenging when trying to integrate? 1st being most difficult.



Result: Housing was identified by participants as the most challenging issue for integration.

## Part 2 – Questions and brief discussion

### Question 1: Employment



91% of participants selected 'Finding a job that matches qualifications and experience'.

*"In Ireland it is all about networking and who you know".*

Two central themes emerged during this discussion: that there are significant barriers and challenges facing refugee and asylum seeker communities when it comes to having educational qualifications gained outside Ireland, recognised in Ireland. The second theme centered on the importance of existing networks when seeking employment and how this can present a barrier to those newly arrived to the country, or those who do not have access to extensive networks here.

#### Key Points:

- Qualifications earned outside Ireland are often not recognised by potential employers. Many refugees and asylum seekers find it necessary to start their studies again.
- Work experience gained outside Ireland is not necessarily taken into account, nor is it valued as much as experience that is gained post arrival.
- People with considerable skills often end up in low-paid, unskilled jobs because qualifications are not recognised.

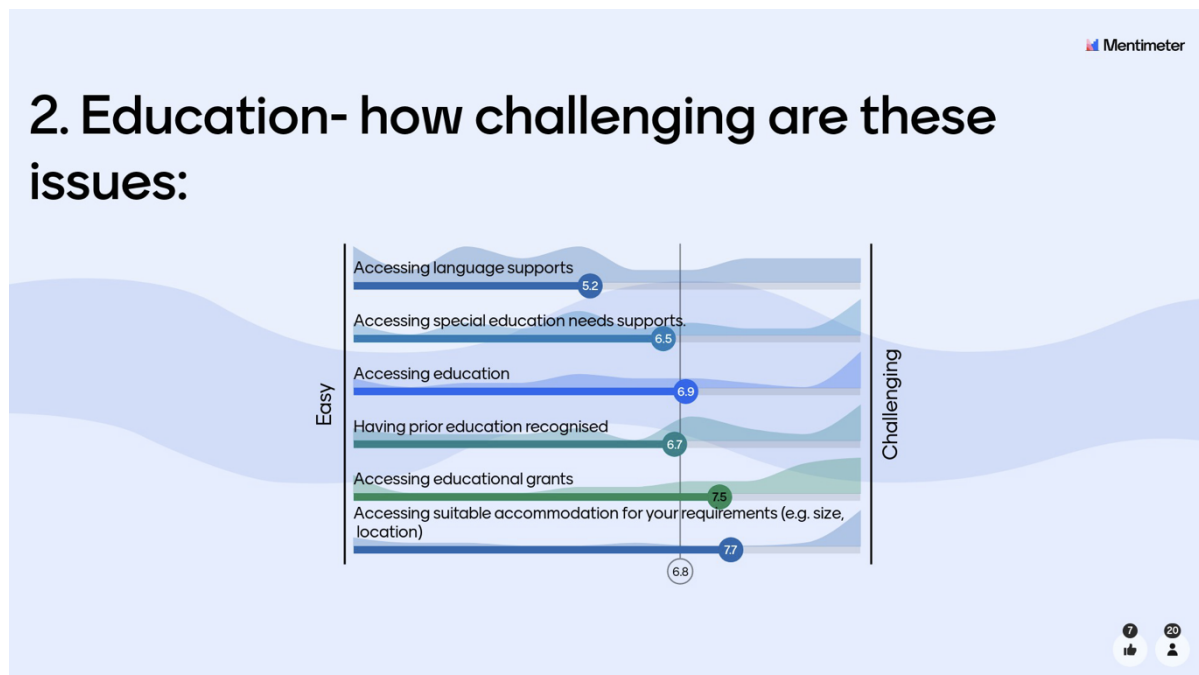
- Participants referenced discrimination and racism in the Irish jobs market. Questions are sometimes asked, both at the application and interview stage, about ethnic background and religious beliefs.
- The Irish jobs market is very 'network driven'. Being in the know, having family and friends to alert you to job openings, or recommending an individual to potential employers is very important. This can act as a significant barrier to migrants who do not have access to those networks.
- Language skills are also a significant barrier and can lead to highly qualified individuals working in low paid, low skilled jobs.
- Local charities and volunteers bear most of the responsibility in Ireland for assisting refugees and asylum seekers to find employment and navigate the jobs market.

### **Potential Solutions:**

- Migrants would benefit from training in Irish interviewing style and would benefit hugely from constructive feedback from potential employers when unsuccessful at interview stage.
- More information about the jobs market, such as, where jobs are advertised, industry specific careers websites, etc. would be helpful.
- More consideration should be given to professional qualifications and work experience acquired outside of Ireland.
- Incentivise employers to hire refugees/asylum seekers.



## Question 2: Education



77% of participants selected ‘Accessing Suitable Accommodation’ as the biggest barrier to education’.

*“Living far from college, I’ve often had to skip classes because I need to get the last bus home”.*

The central theme in this discussion was the challenge of finding suitable, affordable accommodation close to education centres, with all of the barriers, challenges and difficulties that presents. Discussions also centered on the challenge of pursuing studies while living in Direct Provision/emergency accommodation centres.

### Key Points:

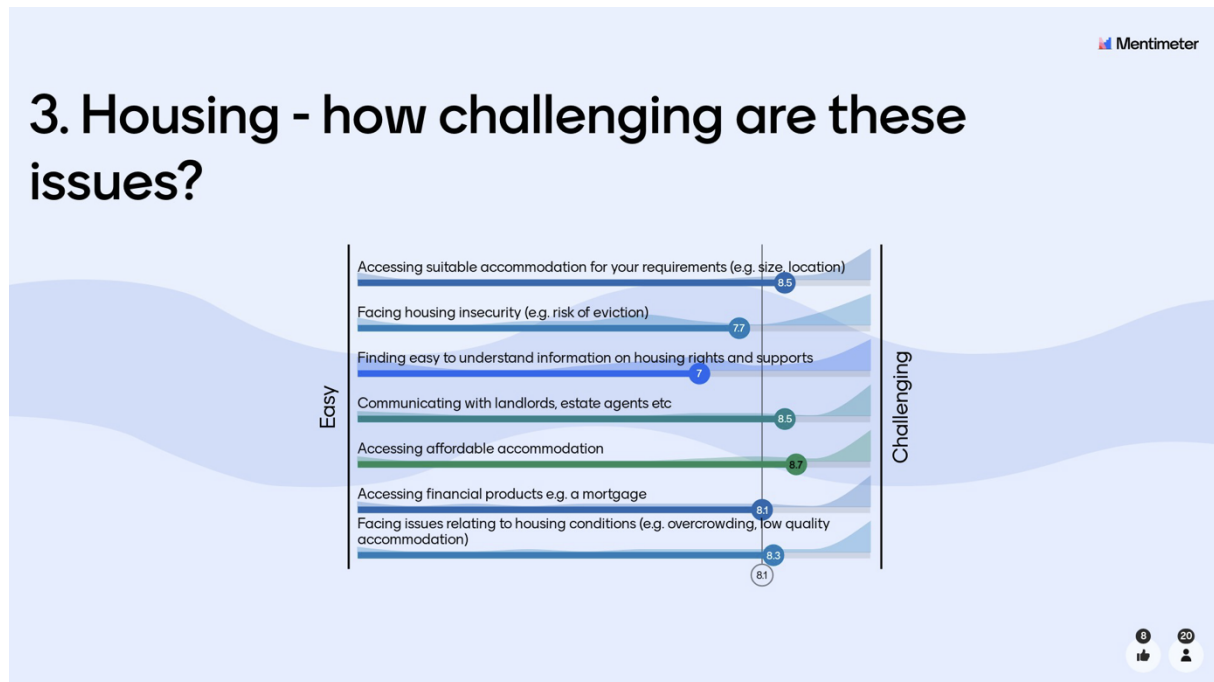
- There is a lack of affordable accommodation throughout Ireland, but particularly in and close to urban hubs, resulting in long commutes to education centres for many.
- Transport in Ireland is expensive and often infrequent with poor connections, resulting in costly and lengthy commutes.
- Long commutes can be exhausting and mentally draining. This, combined with concerns around the cost of the commute, missing classes due to the necessity to leave at a particular time and not having the option to fully integrate into college life can all have a negative impact on students.

- Students are dropping out of education due to the barriers to finding accommodation close to education centres and the resultant commuting challenges.
- The inability to secure permanent accommodation can affect access to education supports because of the necessity to have a fixed address for grant applications.
- The lack of affordable accommodation in certain areas not only affects how you study, but what you study.
- Refugees and asylum seekers are sometimes also parents and securing affordable childcare while trying to study is almost impossible. This is exacerbated by the fact that these individuals usually do not have the support of extended family and/or friendship networks to help out with childcare.
- Individuals attempting to continue their studies while living in Direct Provision or emergency accommodation face unique challenges. In particular, finding quiet spaces to study, having access to reliable wifi and having the funds to support them in situations where they need to commute to education centres.

#### **Potential Solutions:**

- More supports/subsidies for transport for students.
- More affordable student accommodation.
- Quiet places for those studying in DP/emergency accommodation settings.
- Better recognition in Irish education system of qualifications acquired outside Ireland.

## Question 3: Housing



87% of Participants selected: 'Accessing Affordable Accommodation'.

*"Looking at surnames, they make decisions... once you submit your documents or pictures, forget it".*

The discussion focused on the considerable challenges of finding suitable, affordable accommodation in the private rental market. While participants recognised that the housing crisis affects many people in Ireland, participants focused primarily on issues specific to refugees and asylum seeker communities. The discussion focused almost exclusively on the rental market, with very few participants in a position to apply for a mortgage to buy their own home, or having the means to do so without a mortgage.

### Key Points

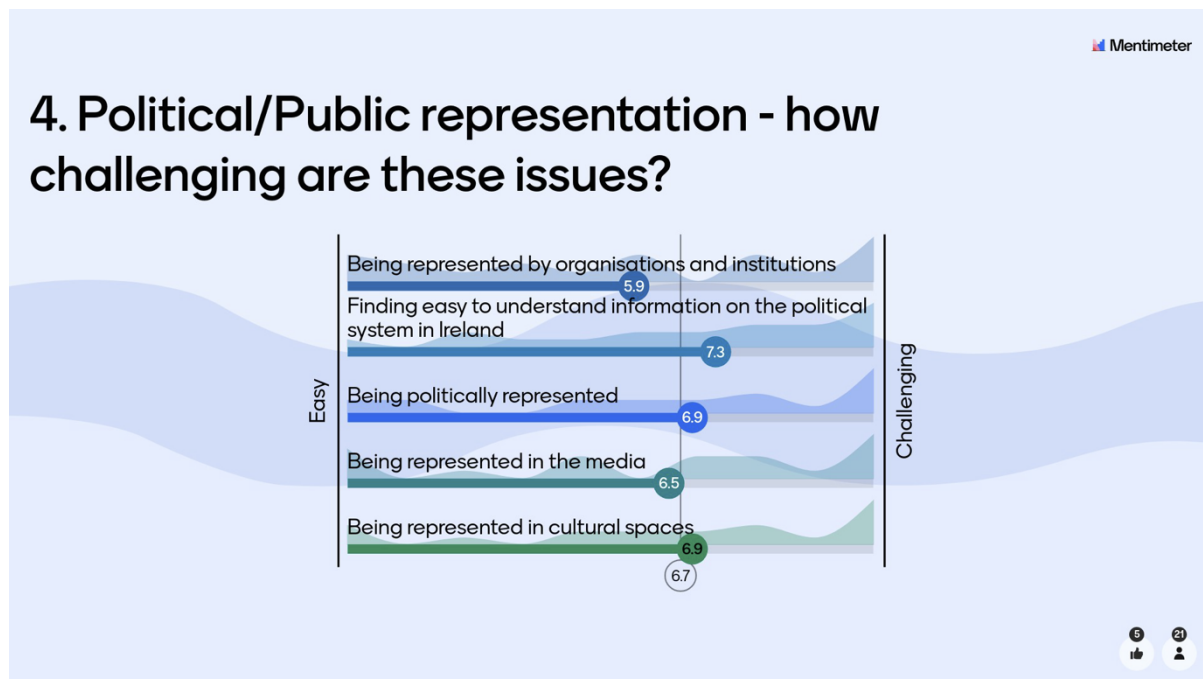
- Significant difficulties with landlords and the rental market. Including:
  - a) Observed discrimination in the rental process with several participants relaying the experience of having observed a bias against renting to non-Irish, and particularly refugees or asylum seekers.
  - b) A bias against renting to single men with a migrant background. A preference for younger women or families with a small number of children.

- c) Participants described getting Irish people to call on their behalf on the understanding that their own accents would be a disadvantage when dealing with landlords.
- Refugees and other migrants less likely to be informed of their rights when it comes to leases, deposits, rent increases and security of tenure. A sense that some landlords are confident those from refugee communities are less likely to assert their rights or complain about problems with rental properties.
  - Refugees are more susceptible to exploitation as a result of a desperation to find accommodation and a lack of knowledge of their rights as tenants.
  - Those with status are being forced to stay on in Direct Provision due to the challenge of finding suitable accommodation in the private rental sector.
  - Difficulties with obtaining references in order to meet the demands of landlords.
  - Homelessness is a real risk for refugees and asylum seekers. Particularly the case for single men.
  - There are close links between housing and integration; those with status cannot integrate properly into communities if they have to remain in DP centres for prolonged periods.
  - A sense that landlords do not want HAP tenants.
  - Rents are unaffordable in many cases.
  - There is not enough social housing, the housing stock in general is too low.

### **Potential Solutions**

- Provide an introduction on the workings of the Irish rental market and inform migrant communities how to navigate the system.
- Inform those with a migrant background of their rights as tenants and how to assert those rights.
- More accountability in the private rental sector to guard against discrimination towards those with a migrant background.
- Better communication by government to highlight the fact that migrants did not create the housing crisis in Ireland.

## Question 4: Political/Public Representation



73% of participants selected 'Finding easy to understand information on the political system in Ireland'.

*"You can't make decisions about refugees and migrants without those populations being represented".*

Participants highlighted an information and knowledge deficit amongst refugee and asylum seeker communities about the Irish political system. They focused on why this might be the case, on the impact of this lack of knowledge and information and on the general absence of engagement amongst their communities with politicians and political representatives.

### Key Points

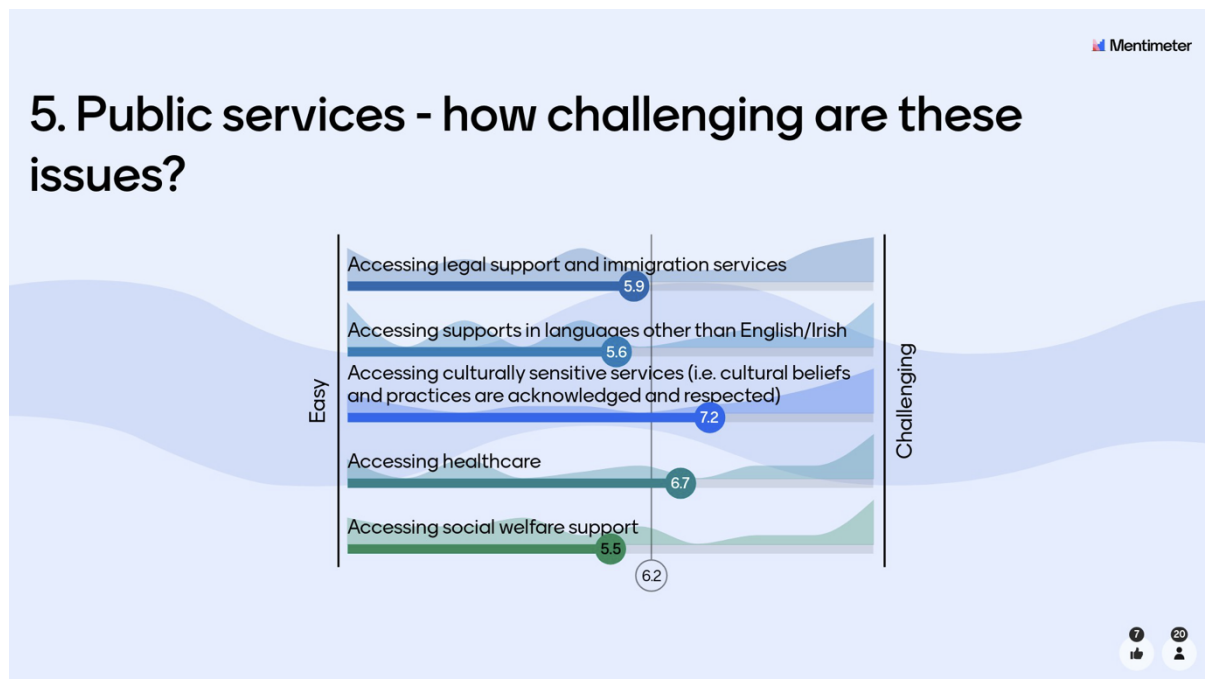
- There is a lack of representation of refugee communities at political level.
- Participants pointed to a lack of awareness of their rights with regard to participating in elections; e.g., awareness that migrants can vote in local elections is not widespread.
- There is a lack of understanding of how the political system works and that public representatives can be approached to assist with specific queries or challenges, e.g. access to housing and other services.

- Public representation is not usually a big concern amongst refugee and migrant communities when they arrive into the country.
- Political representation could be a powerful tool to break down barriers to integration and inclusion. Example cited of Carlow town, where 'one out of every eight' people was not born in Ireland, but where there is a lack of representation of these communities at local level.
- Refugees do not interact with politicians. Politicians do not visit DP Centres. Participants expressed the opinion that some politicians do not fully understand the DP system.
- Politicians are only seen at election time. There is very little awareness of how they can be contacted.
- Politics and politicians are perceived very differently in some cultures. There may be a reluctance, or even a fear of engaging with public representatives, depending on the individual experience in their country of origin, where politics may have been seen as very corrupt and it may have been dangerous to engage in political activity.

### **Potential Solutions**

- More efforts should be made to inform refugee and asylum seeker communities about the political system; critically, they should be informed of their right to vote.
- Refugee and migrant communities should encourage individuals from those communities to join political parties and/or run for election.
- Encourage political parties to have a percentage of candidates with a migrant background.

## Question 5: Public Services



72% of participants selected 'Accessing culturally sensitive services (i.e. cultural beliefs and practices are acknowledged and respected)'

*"The doctors have an attitude like 'in Africa you treat this with home remedies', but we are not in Africa, we are in Ireland".*

Participants spoke openly about their experiences of public services since their arrival to Ireland and in particular, indeed almost exclusively, of their interactions with the health service. Multiple contributors identified a lack of awareness and sensitivity amongst health practitioners of cultural beliefs and practices amongst those from non-Irish communities.

### Key Points

- The approach to mental health issues is very different in Ireland when compared to the countries of origin of some participants. A 'one size fits all' approach by practitioners was identified, with participants noting that they have struggled with this, in particular in situations where people have experienced significant trauma.
- Misunderstanding, lack of cultural awareness, discrimination and racism amongst health practitioners was cited by some participants.

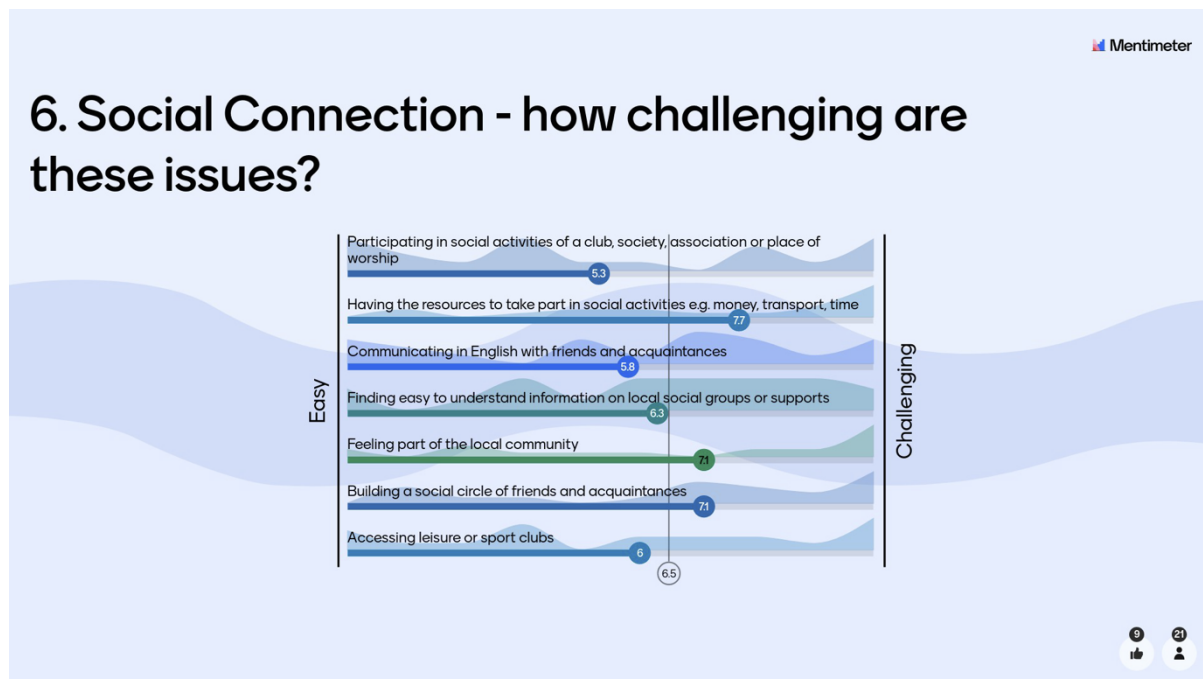
- A key issue was that some women do not wish to attend a male practitioner. This was raised several times as something that has caused distress, trauma and embarrassment.
- Getting culturally sensitive services, for example in cases of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) was cited as difficult everywhere, and almost impossible outside of Dublin. Concerns were expressed that women fear practitioners might feel shocked, or might be judgmental, if they have not been adequately trained to deal with the issue.
- The language barrier can be a significant challenge for those with a refugee background, particularly when dealing with sensitive issues and where ‘local jargon’ is used, leading to confusion and misunderstanding.
- It was explained that in some cases the children of migrants are tasked with interpreting for parents in both healthcare and educational settings. This was described as far from ideal.
- Access to GP care and long waiting lists are a barrier to effective health care. While it was widely acknowledged that this also affects many Irish people, where individuals do not have strong networks and where they do not understand how best to navigate the system, this challenge is exacerbated.
- Cultural diversity in the Garda Síochána was cited as a welcome improvement as “making the situation better”.

### **Potential Solutions**

- Those working in public services should be trained in cultural awareness and sensitivities.
- More language supports across the board would help to break down barriers to accessing public services.



## Question 6: Social Connection



77% of participants selected 'Having the resources to take part in social activities, e.g. money, transport, time'.

*"Irish people love to help, but they don't always know how".*

Making connections through social activities was recognised as a very effective way of furthering and promoting integration and inclusion for refugees and asylum seekers. Overall, there was a sense from the discussions that it is not so easy to meet Irish people; this is particularly the case for single people. Where people have children, interaction via the school system was cited as particularly helpful in terms of getting to know local communities and aiding integration. For the most part the discussion focused on practical barriers to social interaction, most notably, financial and logistical.

### Key Points

- Individuals in the Direct Provision system do not have the disposable income that would allow them to take part in social activities that are not completely free of charge. Even then, there might be transport costs involved which would prove prohibitive.
- The lack of transport, and transport costs involved in taking part in social activities, particularly for those living in rural areas and/or more remote locations can also be a barrier for those with refugee status.

- Fees for activities for children can be very high. The example was given of the prohibitive cost of swimming lessons for young children and the high costs of Irish dancing classes.
- The GAA was cited as a good resource for young people; accessible in most areas and reasonably inexpensive to join a local club.
- Social activities in general are more targeted at children and young people; adults can often feel more isolated with fewer options to engage.
- Participants pointed to pub culture as a central to the social life of Irish people with several individuals remarking that this is a challenge for communities with no drinking culture.
- There is a concentration of social activities and opportunities in large urban centres, with less on offer in rural areas.
- Some participants raised 'legacy issues' around safety, pointing out that for women in particular, the idea of being out on their own after dark is not something they are comfortable with and that they need to reassess their own sense of personal safety.
- It is more difficult to meet Irish people than non-Irish. Social integration seen as "very challenging" by some participants.
- Recent anti-migrant protests are making some feel more wary about seeking out opportunities to get involved in local communities.

### **Potential Solutions**

- More information is needed on activities, clubs, social gatherings, etc.
- This is a two-way street; migrant communities need to reach out to Irish people in social settings, as well as expecting Irish people to include them.
- Local authorities can play a key role in providing funding for activities that encourage integration and inclusion.

## Part 3 – General Discussion

Participants were asked to identify 3 to 4 actions per question. There was considerable overlap in participant responses to Questions 1 and 2. Where the same points were raised multiple times they have been noted just once below.

### Question 1:

*What actions do you think are required to address discrimination against migrants or people with a migrant background?*

Education was cited as a critical tool in addressing discrimination against refugees and asylum seekers. This should begin in primary school by introducing young children to the realities of discrimination and racism in as gentle a way as possible. Schools are an ideal setting to begin educating young people about migration, to explain why some people are forced to leave their homes, and to showcase the benefits of welcoming people from other countries.

Away from school settings, participants identified the need to educate society as a whole about refugees and asylum seekers, such as explaining the difference between migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and raising awareness of how migrants can contribute to Ireland. The public should be warned and made aware of the dangers of misinformation and disinformation. They should be informed of the basic facts of how the international protection system operates.

The workplace can be a positive force for integration but employers need to be better educated and sensitized in order to encourage a more diverse and integrated workforce. Employees should be made aware of their rights and should be encouraged to speak out where they see racism or discrimination in the workforce.

People living in Direct Provision should strive to become more involved in local communities. A positive gesture could be to form a team to help out with Tidy Towns initiatives, or local environmental campaigns. This has happened in the past, to great effect.

Politicians, local and national, need to show strong and positive leadership. There should be consequences for politicians who try to scape goat migrants or blame them for housing shortages or pressures on public services.

## Question 2:

*In your opinion, what do you think should be the main priorities for supporting migrant integration in Ireland?*

Opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to interact with local communities should be optimised.

There should be a 'Day of Refugees' where people invite someone with a refugee background into their home. Interaction is key to breaking down barriers to integration.

Refugee voices should be part of the discussion. Communication of positive stories about refugees in media and elsewhere would help to combat misinformation.

There should be consequences for those who intimidate and spread disinformation.

Where possible, migrant communities should be involved in the formation of public policy affecting them.

While NGOs and voluntary groups are doing great work with these communities, more government sponsored and facilitated events would give refugees and asylum seekers a stronger sense of welcome and inclusion.

## Question 3:

*Are there any comments you would like to make in relation to the supports already available, or which you think should be available, for migrants?*

More access to language courses, not just for complete beginners, but those eager to improve their language skills at intermediate and more advanced levels.

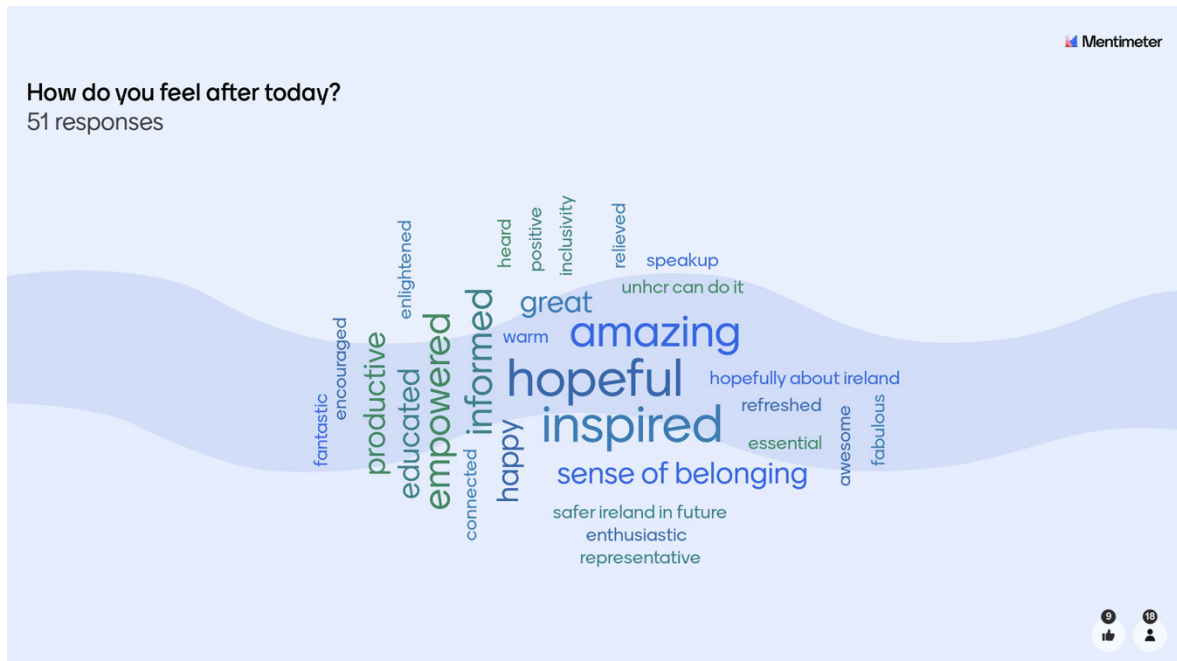
Access to culturally aware public services (particularly health services).

Mental health services for refugees and asylum seekers continuing to carry trauma from their experiences before arriving in Ireland.

"Ireland is a welcoming country, but we all need to keep working and be active in making it better".

## Part 4 – Participants’ feedback:

And finally, participants described, in a few words, their thoughts on the workshop:



## Appendix A

The views and opinions captured in this document represent those of the 22 participants, with a refugee or asylum seeker background, who took part in this one-day consultation. They ranged in age from early twenties to late fifties and sixties, representing multiple nationalities living in various locations, both urban and rural, across Ireland. Some participants had recently arrived to Ireland, while others have been living in the country for more than 20 years. Of the 22 participants who took part in the consultation 13 were women and 9 were men.

Participants were divided across five tables, with 4 participants per table. One facilitator and one note-taker was assigned to each table with the task of guiding the discussion and capturing in detail the opinions, experiences and potential solutions, as expressed by the participants.

Participants were encouraged to speak openly during the consultation and assured that their responses to any questions would be anonymized.

All participants agreed to have their names included as part of the final submission.

The consultation took place in Dublin city over the course of five hours, with considerable time given by the participants to in-depth discussion of the questions posed in the online survey.